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ART. X. — *La Guerra del Vespro Siciliano, o un Periodo delle Istorie Siciliane del Secolo Decimo Terzo*. Per MICHELE AMARI. Seconda Edizione. Parizi: Baudry. 1843. 2 vols. 8vo.

IT is curious that some of the most important events of history have been so misrepresented by popular tradition as to be understood in their true light by only a few learned antiquarians. We are often taught to believe, that circumstances, in reality the result of a long series of secretly working causes, occur on a sudden, and without the slightest preparation; or that events which are manifested by spontaneous outbreaks of popular feeling — although these, too, have a deep root in the past — are but the result of some petty machination or ignoble conspiracy. The cause of these errors in historical traditions is, no doubt, to be found in that disposition of our nature which leads us to fix our attention upon some one simple and dramatic occurrence, whilst we throw into the shade the minor events which alone can furnish any explanation of the leading phenomenon. By thus reducing history to the simple narrative of those events which we consider as the most important, we lose many of its most instructive lessons. Providence often inculcates the most salutary truths by means of those circumstances which are too apt to escape our notice altogether. To its superintending care no occurrence is insignificant; to us also none would seem so, if it were possible for human eyes to gain the same comprehensive view.

Of all the errors in history which may be attributed to this cause, few are more striking than those which have been propagated on the subject of the celebrated revolution, commonly known as the Sicilian Vespers. It has been generally believed, that this cruel massacre was the result of a conspiracy headed by Giovanni da Procida, in order to place Peter of Aragon on the throne of Sicily. In the work before us, Mr. Amari has endeavoured to show how erroneous is this view of a revolution which was equally just and noble in its origin and important in its effects. The whole aim of his book is to prove that the Sicilian Vespers, far from being the result of a conspiracy, was rather a popular outbreak, the immediate occasion of which was the insolent

behaviour of the French at Palermo, while its remote causes are to be found in the unhappy social and political condition of a people, who were neither accustomed nor disposed to suffer a tyrannical foreign dominion. He remarks in his Preface, that being a Sicilian by birth, and consequently well acquainted with the peculiar genius of his countrymen, he was more capable than any foreigner could be both of understanding and explaining to others the real nature of the Sicilian revolution of 1282, "a revolution wished for, but not planned, — resolved upon and executed in an instant."

The family of Norman princes which reigned in Sicily had become extinct in 1186, on the death of William the Good. Resisting the pretensions of Constance, his aunt, who had married Henry the Sixth, emperor of Germany, the Sicilian nobles wished to raise Tancred, the illegitimate cousin of William, to the throne. On hearing of this design, the emperor hastened to Sicily, defeated Tancred, and took possession of the island. At his death, Frederic the Second, of the illustrious house of the Hohenstauffen, ascended the throne of Sicily, at first under the guardianship of his mother, but after the death of this princess under that of Pope Innocent the Third, who did not fail to take advantage of his situation in order to increase his own power. The long and bloody quarrels which arose between the Holy See and Frederic the Second, during which this prince was excommunicated, did not cease with his death, in 1250. On the contrary, no sooner had this event taken place, than the pope endeavoured to excite the whole of Italy against the house of Hohenstauffen. He partially succeeded in this design, and even prevented Conrad, the grandson of Frederic, from ascending the imperial throne, although he had already been named King of the Romans. In the southern provinces of the peninsula, the efforts of the pope were attended with less success, owing to the courage of Manfred, a natural son of Frederic. The heroic manner in which this prince defended the interests of his nephew enabled Conrad to take possession of the whole of Sicily. He lived, however, but two years to enjoy his conquest, and died, leaving an only son, named Conrad, but commonly called Conradin, on account of the brevity of his life.

Conrad had recommended this child to the care of the pope, which did not prevent Innocent from persecuting

the Hohenstauffen as before. In order to overthrow Conradin, he flattered the passions of the Sicilians, who soon rose against their sovereign and dethroned him. A sort of republic was then established in the island ; but Manfred succeeded once more in reconquering the kingdom of his nephew. For a short time, he contented himself with governing in the name of this prince ; but he soon caused a rumor of the death of Conradin to be circulated, and on the 11th of August, 1258, he was crowned at Palermo, as sole heir and successor of Frederic the Second, thus usurping the throne of his nephew. The pope, finding himself not sufficiently strong to resist the heroic Manfred, resolved to offer the Sicilian throne to some foreign prince. He accordingly proposed it successively to Richard, Duke of Cornwall, brother of Henry the Third of England, to Charles, Count of Anjou and Provence, brother of Saint Louis, and at last to Edmund, grandson of Henry. The king of England would willingly have accepted this offer for his grandson ; but the exactions of the pope were so excessive, and his proposed conditions so unreasonable, that the parliament refused to sanction any act of the king in this affair. Louis the Ninth, on the contrary, refused the crown for his brother Charles ; but the pope — who excited the ambition of Charles, and endeavoured to convince the king of the necessity of establishing a powerful government in Sicily, in order to resist the progress of heresy and rebellion in that part of Italy — succeeded in vanquishing his scruples. For the good of the Church, Louis the Ninth, who was sincerely attached to his religion, consented to enter upon an arrangement which at heart he probably disapproved ; for he was too good and too wise a prince not to see that it was an act of manifest injustice.

On the 25th of February, 1265, all the preliminary arrangements being terminated, Pope Clement the Fourth, a Frenchman by birth, published a bull, which declared that the territory extending from the Straits of Messina to the frontiers of the Papal States, with the exception of Benevento, should be granted to Charles of Anjou, as a vassal of the Holy See, upon condition that he should pay annually eight thousand ounces of gold to the pope, and lend him military aid in case of necessity. Thus, under the pretence of defending the interests of the Church, was the kingdom of

Naples and Sicily sold to Charles of Anjou. As soon as he could muster an army, this prince hastened to Italy, where, after he had been crowned with his queen at the Vatican, he lost no time in endeavouring to meet his enemy, Manfred, in the field. An occasion soon presented itself ; the armies of the two princes encountered each other at Benevento, on the 26th of February, 1266. The French were victorious, and Manfred, finding that all was lost, threw himself into the ranks of the enemy, and found the death which he desired.

But the death of this prince did not deliver Charles from all his enemies. The party of the Ghibellines soon resolved to resist the usurpation of the house of Anjou. Conradin, and one of his relatives, Frederic of Austria, took part in this design ; and they hastened to Sicily, followed by a large number of German barons. But they were defeated at the battle of Tagliacozzo, on the 23d of August, 1268. Conradin and Frederic were both made prisoners, and led to Naples, where they were beheaded on the public square, in violation of every principle of justice and public law, even as understood in that barbarous age. This act of tyranny was but the first of a long series of cruelties which were destined to render the reign of Charles of Anjou sadly memorable.

Scarcely had the king got rid of his enemies, when he forgot all the promises he had made to the pope before his accession to the throne. Instead of restoring to the papal government the property which the princes of the house of Hohenstauffen had wrongfully seized, he took possession even of those ecclesiastical lands which his predecessors had left untouched. Avarice alone seems to have guided the new king in most of the acts of his reign. Taxes were imposed, not for the public use, but under pretence of the necessity of reducing by this means an arrogant and dangerous people, and really for the sole purpose of enriching the royal treasury. These taxes were so onerous, and frequently levied in so arbitrary a manner, as to excite great discontent among the nobles and the people. Clement the Fourth wrote twice to Charles to remind him of his engagements, but without effect. Not satisfied with ruining the people by many and heavy exactions, Charles went so far as to seize their lands, and distribute them among the numerous adventurers who had followed him to Italy, and who, for the most part, had been

induced to leave their native country only by the hope of obtaining the spoils of victory. The most futile pretences were resorted to in order to dispossess the landholders of their property. The new barons, in their turn, gratified their retainers with smaller grants, and thus a new feudal division was established in Sicily upon the ruins of the former one.

Another evil inflicted by this prince upon the unhappy Sicilians was the debasement of the coin. During the dominion of the Hohenstauffen, the coining of money had been conducted upon more strict principles than in any other part of Europe. But by order of Charles of Anjou, the ancient *agostalis* was displaced by *carlinis* and half-*carlinis*, which professed to be of pure gold and to have the same weight as the *agostalis*, but were in reality far inferior to it in value. By this fraudulent contrivance, the treasury gained eighty *per cent.* on the coining of money.

Among other tyrannical decrees promulgated during this reign was one which ordered that no grain should be ground in any mills except in those belonging to government; and which threatened with severe punishment, not only those who should disobey this order, but even those who might purchase the forbidden article. No person in Sicily was safe; the lands of the peasantry were seized without assigning any cause or pretext for the forfeiture. At the tables of the foreign lords, men of the most illustrious and noble families were obliged to serve as menials, and young men, born to command in the field, were employed like slaves in the kitchen of their masters. Neither age nor sex was respected; married women and young maidens were grossly insulted in the presence of their husbands and parents. During the reign of the Emperor Frederic the Second, the laws of the state had been for the most part equitable. Charles caused many of them to be changed, and the administration of justice in Sicily was reduced to a degrading traffic. The ancient parliament, which might have obliged the king to retract some of his oppressive decrees, was never assembled.

Charles was not content with thus violating the fundamental laws of the state, and treating the inhabitants of Sicily with so much cruelty; he inflicted a still greater injury upon their pride by transferring the seat of government from Palermo to Naples. Thus, whilst the island was groaning under

the tyrannical yoke of its foreign ruler, the continental part of the kingdom was in the most flourishing condition. Charles had restored the University of Naples to its pristine splendor, and this city presented an uninterrupted scene of gayety, whilst Sicily was suffering all the evils and privations which a despotic power can inflict upon a conquered and dependent country.

The impolitic conduct of the French in Sicily had excited against them the indignation of the natives, and an occasion alone was wanting to convert this feeling into open rebellion. Besides Sicilians, the French had other enemies. Constance, granddaughter of Manfred, had sworn to revenge the death of her grandfather. She was married to Peter, Infant of Aragon, who was called to the throne of that country in 1277, and she had never lost an opportunity of instigating him to undertake an expedition against the French in Sicily, in order to restore her to the throne of her ancestors. Giovanni da Procida, one of the king's favorites and the avowed enemy of Charles, inspired his master with similar thoughts of conquest. This celebrated person, whose name has been handed down to posterity as the hero of the Sicilian Vespers, was born at Salerno. He had distinguished himself at the court of Naples as a physician and a scholar. It has been generally thought that he left that court, because Charles had refused to give him satisfaction for the insults offered to his wife and daughters by some Frenchmen; but from evidence adduced in the work before us, it seems that he was banished because he had taken part with Conradin and the Ghibellines when they conspired against the French dominion. Be this as it may, he sought a refuge at the court of Aragon, where his efforts, combined with those of Queen Constance, succeeded in prevailing upon Peter to attempt an invasion of Sicily. This, according to our author, is the only share which Procida had in the revolution of 1282. Mr. Amari does not believe what has often been asserted, that Procida was sent to form an alliance with the pope. He admits, however, that Peter may have had a secret understanding with a few Sicilian nobles, and that Procida may have been employed in these negotiations; but he insists that the people of Palermo took arms before this conspiracy was ripe.

As we have said, Palermo suffered more than any other Sicilian city from the oppressive government of the French.

In the spring of 1282, the preparations which Charles was making for a war with the Emperor of the East caused new taxes to be assessed throughout Sicily. Heavy contributions were levied on the inhabitants of this devoted city, and even on Easter Sunday, while the people were offering their thanksgivings in the different churches, the rapacious agents of the exchequer did not scruple to penetrate into these sacred places, and to drag from the altar those unhappy persons who had not yet been able to pay the taxes. These and similar acts of cruelty, added to the general ill-feeling which was entertained in Sicily against the French, exasperated to the last degree a people, who, although crushed by a despotic foreign dominion, had not yet lost all hope of seeing their country once more independent.

On Tuesday, the 30th of March, two days after Easter, a religious ceremony was to take place at the church of Santo Spirito. The inhabitants of the town, at the appointed time, hastened to the place of worship, and every thing wore an aspect of contentment and happiness. Among the crowd which was going towards the church was a young lady holding the arm of her husband. A Frenchman who was in the press, under the pretence of searching for hidden weapons among the people, met this couple, and offered a gross indignity to the lady. His brutality alarmed her so much, that she fainted, and her husband, pale with rage, exclaimed, — “Death, death to the French !” At these words, a young man advanced from the crowd and plunged a knife into the heart of the insolent Frenchman. This deed had a more prompt and powerful effect upon the people than any deliberate act of conspiracy could have produced. It seemed to animate them at once with the same purpose, and the air was filled with cries of “Death, death to the French !” This cry, says an author of the time, resounded through the whole country like the voice of God, and penetrated every heart. The ground was soon covered with victims. The multitude, increasing at every step, searched every part of the town, and every person who could not pronounce the word *ciciri* without the hissing sound usually given to it by foreigners was immediately put to death. The French, as if they knew they had merited their fate, made no resistance, and were massacred without pity. Neither women nor children were spared.

But the details of the horrors committed during this dreadful night are too revolting to be related; no less than two thousand Frenchmen were slain before morning. Horrible as this indiscriminate butchery seems to our modern notions of justice and humanity, it is hardly to be wondered at, considering the fervid temperament of the Sicilians, and the magnitude of the provocations they had received. Mr. Amari certainly is less inclined to condemn his countrymen for the cruelties committed by them during the Vespers, than to deplore the atrocity of those acts which urged them at last to set aside all the laws of humanity, in order to free themselves from the chains which their oppressors had riveted upon them. Nine of the principal citizens of the town were chosen by the people as their chiefs, amidst cries of *Buono stato è libertà*, whilst the ancient gonfalon of Palermo was unfurled.

The spirit of rebellion spread like a conflagration throughout the island. Letters were despatched to the inhabitants of Messina, to induce them to imitate the example given by Palermo, and to take arms against the French. In these letters, Charles was termed a Nero and a monster, whilst Messina was represented as the innocent victim of his cruelty. This town soon embraced the cause of the revolution, and from one end of Sicily to the other the French were threatened with total extermination. Charles was at the Papal court when the news of the dreadful massacre of Palermo reached him. Such was his astonishment at the news, that he seemed at first disposed to bow to the stroke as if it were a dispensation of Providence. He was heard to say in prayer, — “Since it has pleased Thee to change my fortunes, grant that my downfall may not be too rapid.” His feelings on the subject, however, soon changed, and he hastened to Naples, where he gave way to the most unbounded passion, and made preparations in great haste to inflict a signal act of vengeance upon the rebellious Sicilians. He resolved to proceed immediately, at the head of large forces, to Sicily, and to storm the city of Messina. On the 25th of July, he arrived before this city, which the inhabitants were prepared to defend with the utmost energy. While the siege was going on, the Sicilians, finding that the republican form of government which they had established was not sufficiently strong to enable them to remain independent, resolved to call

Peter of Aragon to the throne. This prince arrived in Sicily about the end of August, and the appearance of his admiral with a powerful fleet shortly afterwards obliged Charles to raise the siege of Messina.

From this period, notwithstanding the reiterated efforts of the French to reconquer Sicily, their dominion in this island may be said to have ceased. Mr. Amari, in the work of which we have attempted to give a rapid outline of the most important part, has not terminated his account at the Sicilian Vespers, but has brought down the narrative until the peace signed in 1302, at Callabellotta, between Charles the Second, king of Naples, and Frederic, king of Sicily, that being the first cessation of hostilities since the Vespers. From the title of his work, it is evident that his design was not merely to give an account of the massacre at Palermo in 1282, but to embrace the whole period of Sicilian history of which this celebrated event was the principal incident.

In the present article, we have endeavoured to present only a brief sketch of that part of the work which gives an account of the Vespers. It seems to us, after an attentive perusal of this account, and of the highly interesting appendix to the work, in which Mr. Amari has minutely examined all the authorities from which he has gathered his materials, that it is impossible not to view this insurrection in the same light as the author has done. If Peter of Aragon and Giovanni da Procida were the real contrivers of the massacre, it is singular that none of the most esteemed historians of the time should have mentioned the fact. Thus, for example, Saba Malaspina, the secretary of Pope Martin the Fourth, in his history, makes no mention of any conspiracy. Yet this author was a Guelf, a friend to the pope and to Charles of Anjou, and the enemy of Peter; he was, moreover, as he says in his Preface, an eyewitness of nearly all the events which he relates.* Is it likely, then, if the Vespers were the result of a conspiracy, that he would not have said so? And Dante, who in the *Divina Commedia* is considered most exact in all that appertains to Italian history, mentions the Vespers without saying any thing of a plot formed by Giovanni da Procida. But it would be trespassing too far on the indulgence of

* "*Nec ambages inserere, aut incredibilia immiscere, sed vera, vel similia; quæ aut vidi, aut videre potui, vel audivi communibus divulgata sermonibus.*"

our readers to follow our author in his examination of the comparative value of the different historical accounts of this great event. We recommend the perusal of the work itself to those who may wish to test the accuracy of the story as told by Sismondi, and other late historians.

It should be remarked, that although the Vespers must not be considered as the result of a conspiracy, there is reason to believe that a conspiracy did exist. We have already stated, that Peter of Aragon and Giovanni da Procida formed a plot with some of the Sicilians to restore Constance to the throne of her fathers ; that they entered into communication with some Italian noblemen ; but that these noblemen would not have been able to overthrow the French government, if the Sicilian people, with that impetuosity and want of prudence which are characteristic of an uneducated multitude, had not undertaken to free themselves from the oppression and tyranny of their rulers. The concerted plan, therefore, remained without effect, until the people, generally more capable of making a revolution than of governing themselves after the revolution is accomplished, were no longer able to resist the attempts of the French to reconquer the country. Pedro was then called to the throne, and the object of the conspiracy finally attained.

The origin of the popular account of the Vespers may be explained without difficulty. The republican government, which was in reality the result of the massacre at Palermo and the insurrection of the Sicilians, lasted so short a time, and the king of Aragon was so soon afterwards called to the throne, that it was very easy to consider the two events as cause and effect, and to believe that the accession of Pedro to the throne of Sicily was the immediate result of the Vespers ; yet it was only the effect of the disunion of the people after they had recovered their liberty, and of their manifest unfitness to govern themselves. In consequence of the erroneous account which modern historians have given of this affair, Giovanni da Procida has been chosen as the hero of many a romance and drama, while even the name of the young man who gave the signal for this terrible massacre by striking the Frenchman has not been transmitted to posterity. Such are the caprices of history ; the story of the adventurer who sought a refuge at the court of Pedro of Aragon is preserved ; the name of him who had the courage to strike the first blow for the liberty of his country has been forgotten.

Looking at the event with the fullest knowledge we can gain of its causes and consequences, it is natural to ask what the Sicilians gained by this bloody insurrection. Was it any thing more than a mere change of name in those who held the reins of government ? At first, it was much more. When a change of the reigning family appears to be the only result of a successful rebellion, the government which succeeds is not likely, unless deprived of all freedom of action, to fall into the same errors as its predecessor. But a revolutionary government is apt soon to forget the causes of its origin, and the persons to whom it is indebted for its establishment. This was the case with the government of the house of Aragon in Sicily. At first, the Spanish princes introduced many useful reforms into the administration ; but these soon gave way to new abuses, and the island was again involved in all the evils of misgovernment, which it had sought to avoid by the fearful tragedy of the Sicilian Vespers. The people were oppressed by their new tyrants in the same manner as they had been by the house of Anjou, and to a certain degree by that of the Hohenstauffen.

Posterity, however, may gain much by the remembrance of this event. The history of this period places before the eyes of the present oppressors of Italy a terrible example of the energy displayed in defence of their most sacred rights, by the ancestors of the people whom they now trample upon. Let us hope that the Italians, who are still suffering under the odious yoke of a foreign dominion, may never be tempted to repeat in the streets of Venice or Milan the bloody scenes of the Sicilian Vespers ; but rather, when the time is at hand for their deliverance, that Italy may be freed from all foreign rule, without any violent commotion and may once more become what it was in former years, the flourishing abode of commerce, civilization, and the arts.